

Remarks on Signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009

January 29, 2009

All right, everybody please have a seat. Well, this is a wonderful day. First of all, it is fitting that the very first bill that I sign—the Lilly Ledbetter fair pay restoration act—that it is upholding one of this Nation's founding principles: That we are all created equal and each deserve a chance to pursue our own version of happiness.

It's also fitting that we're joined today by the woman after whom this bill is named; someone who Michelle and I have had the privilege to get to know ourselves. And it is fitting that we are joined this morning by the first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi. It's appropriate that this is the first bill we do together. We could not have done it without her. Madam Speaker, thank you for your extraordinary work—and to all the sponsors and Members of Congress and leadership who helped to make this day possible.

Lilly Ledbetter did not set out to be a trailblazer or a household name. She was just a good, hard worker who did her job, and she did it well, for nearly two decades before discovering that for years she was paid less than her male colleagues for doing the very same work. Over the course of her career, she lost more than \$200,000 in salary and even more in pension and Social Security benefits; losses that she still feels today.

Now, Lilly could have accepted her lot and moved on. She could have decided that it wasn't worth the hassle and the harassment that would inevitably come with speaking up for what she deserved. But instead, she decided that there was a principle at stake, something worth fighting for. So she set out on a journey that would take more than 10 years, take her all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States, and lead to this day and this bill which will help others get the justice that she was denied.

Because, while this bill bears her name, Lilly knows that this story isn't just about her. It's the story of women across this country still earning just 78 cents for every dollar men earn—women of color even less—which means that today, in the year 2009, countless women are still losing thousands of dollars in salary, income, and retirement savings over the course of a lifetime.

Equal pay is by no means just a women's issue; it's a family issue. It's about parents who find themselves with less money for tuition and child care; couples who wind up with less to retire on; households where one breadwinner is paid less than she deserves. That's the difference between affording the mortgage or not; between keeping the heat on or paying the doctor bills, or not. And in this economy, when so many folks are already working harder for less and struggling to get by, the last thing they can afford is losing part of each month's paycheck to simple and plain discrimination.

So signing this bill today is to send a clear message that making our economy work means making sure it works for everybody. That there are no second-class citizens in our workplaces; and that it's not just unfair and illegal, it's bad for business to pay somebody less because of their gender or their age or their race or their ethnicity, religion or disability; and that justice isn't about some abstract legal theory or footnote in a casebook. It's about how our laws affect the daily lives and the daily realities of people; their ability to make a living and care for their families and achieve their goals.

Ultimately, equal pay isn't just an economic issue for millions of Americans and their families; it's a question of who we are and whether we're truly living up to our fundamental ideals; whether we'll do our part, as generations before us, to ensure those words put on paper some 200 years ago really mean something, to breathe new life into them with a more enlightened understanding that is appropriate for our time.

That is what Lilly Ledbetter challenged us to do. And today I sign this bill not just in her honor, but in the honor of those who came before. Women like my grandmother, who worked in a bank all her life, and even after she hit that glass ceiling, kept getting up and giving her best every day, without complaint, because she wanted something better for me and my sister.

And I sign this bill for my daughters and all those who will come after us, because I want them to grow up in a nation that values their contributions, where there are no limits to their dreams, and they have opportunities their mothers and grandmothers never could have imagined.

In the end, that's why Lilly stayed the course. She knew it was too late for her; that this bill wouldn't undo the years of injustice she faced or restore the earnings she was denied. But this grandmother from Alabama kept on fighting, because she was thinking about the next generation. It's what we've always done in America, set our sights high for ourselves, but even higher for our children and our grandchildren.

And now it's up to us to continue this work. This bill is an important step—a simple fix to ensure fundamental fairness for American workers—and I want to thank this remarkable and bipartisan group of legislators who worked so hard to get it passed. And I want to thank all the advocates who are in the audience who worked so hard to get it passed. This is only the beginning. I know that if we stay focused, as Lilly did, and keep standing for what's right, as Lilly did, we will close that pay gap, and we will make sure that our daughters have the same rights, the same chances, and the same freedoms to pursue their dreams as our sons.

So thank you, Lilly Ledbetter.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:20 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lilly Ledbetter, former employee, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. S. 181, approved January 29, was assigned Public Law No. 111–2.

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